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The City That Is Not: Apophasis and Anglo-Saxon Urbanism

ABSTRACT: The article discusses two Old English cases of walking through cities that no longer exist and the implications that such visions entail for early medieval philosophical perspectives. The first part proposes a conjectural vision of the city of Rome from around the time of the visits of young Prince Alfred of Wessex, future King Alfred the Great, in 853 and in 855 A.D. The second part is constructed upon an understanding of one of the Exeter Book elegies, *The Ruin*, presenting musings on whatever remained from another Roman city, conceivably identifiable with Aqua Sulis, that is, Bath. The reflections of the former encounter with the city may be, perhaps, found in the Meters that accompany Alfred-inspired translation of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*, and the city present in *The Ruin* is another example of the *excidio urbis* theme. Together, the two visions confirm the Old English metaphysical value of the city that becomes its negative, that is, the city that is formed by absences, lacunae, and vestiges of its past. Seen in this light, the "cities that are not" are presented here as instances of apophatic thinking, akin to that of Pseudo-Dionysius, whereby more can be expressed by questions and negative statements than by factual testimonials. The proposed Anglo-Saxon walks through ruined cities paradoxically offer an augmentation of reality and an existential practice in the elusiveness of signification extending beyond urban boundaries.

KEYWORDS: Old English, King Alfred the Great, Boethius, Rome, *The Ruin*, apophasis

The point of departure for this paper is furnished by two Old English instances of walking through cities that, at the times which are interesting for us, were both cities that were no longer, that is, for centuries already, they both were largely ruined. That they amazed those who encountered

them is beyond doubt, that this amazement must have involved a degree of flaneurism is doubtless either. My intention here, however, is to speak of what may be called "negative amazement" or a negative image of the city in Old English poetic expression. By 'negative' I do not mean the ruined city itself, but its mental and poetic construct emanating from what was left of it and thus from what was unknown, unfamiliar or speculative about the city itself. What transpires from this form of urban amazement are instances little short of some urban apophasis, that is a perception mirroring the manner of speaking about God in terms of what God is not.

The identity of the first of the two cities which are to serve as examples in the present paper is beyond any doubt. It is Rome, a city which, along with Constantinople and Jerusalem, was the synonym of an urban structure before the rise of Paris, London, and the like in the later Middle Ages. To be precise, it is Rome in the middle of the ninth century, and it is Rome as it may be imagined being seen through the eyes of a boy who travelled there twice, first aged five in the year 853 and then aged seven or eight in 855, when he came there with his father, King Æthelwulf of Wessex. The boy's name was Alfred, the king's fifth son and thus a person who, initially at least, must have seemed unlikely to succeed him on the throne. Among the reasons Alfred's father decided to take his young son with him on what had to be long and strenuous journeys could have been the fact that Alfred, preceded by four brothers in the line to the crown, might have been intended for a religious position, and hence, perhaps, his father's intention to acquaint him with the political and religious centre of the Christian world that Rome was.

Alfred's first encounter with the city, which he reached with a sizeable retinue of nobles, is marked by a singular honour bestowed on him by the then pope, Leo IV. If we are to believe *Vita Aelfredi* by Asser, Alfred's late ninth-century biographer and apologist: *Quo tempore dominus Leo Papa apostolicae sedi praeerat, qui praefatum infantem Aelfredum oppido ordinans unxit in regem, et in filium adoptionis sibimet accipiens confirmavit.*[1]—"At this time the lord Pope Leo was ruling the Apostolic

1 Asser (Asserius), *De rebus gestis Aelfredi* (*Vita Aelfredi*), 8, *The Latin Library*, accessed January 5, 2015, http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/asserius.html. Henceforth referred to as Asser, *Vita Aelfredi*.

See; he anointed the child Alfred as king, ordaining him properly, received him as an adoptive son and confirmed him."[2] While the mention of the boy being anointed future king is in all likelihood an instance of royal hagiography on Asser's part,[3] from the pope himself we hear about an honour equally extraordinary. In a letter to the boy's father, King Æthelwulf, Pope Leo writes: *Filium vestrum Erfred* [i.e. Alfred], *quem hoc in tempore ad sanctorum apostolorum limina destinare curates, benigne suscepimus, et quasi spiritalem filium consulates cinguli honore vestimentisque, ut mos est Romanis consulibus, decoravimus, eo quod in nostris se tradidit manibus.*[4]—"We have now graciously received your son Alfred, whom you were anxious to send at this time to the thresholds of the Holy Apostles, and we have decorated him, as a spiritual son, with the dignity of the belt [*or* sword] and the vestments of the consulate, as is customary with Roman consuls, because he gave himself into our hands."[5] What Leo describes as Alfred "giving himself" into his hands was conceivably a form of allegiance, albeit symbolic, that the pope was eager to set with a distant Christian kingdom.

Asser claims that Alfred's second journey to Rome three years later was even more stately; he accompanied his father, the king. As they slowly progressed through continental Europe they were received and provided with assistance by the grandson of Charlemagne and king of the Franks, Charles the Bald, who twenty years later was to become Holy Roman Emperor. The party eventually reached Rome, where, according to Asser, the king and his son spent one year: *Eodemque anno*

2 Asser, *Life of King Alfred* in *Alfred the Great. Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 69. Henceforth referred to as Asser, *Life of King Alfred*.

3 Cf., for instance, Allen J. Frantzen, *King Alfred* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 4–5.

4 "Leo Edelvulfo regi Anglorum," in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Epistolarum Tomus V. Karolini Aevii III*, eds. Gesellschaft für ältere deutsche Geschichtskunde (Berlin: Apud Weidmannos, 1899), 602.

5 Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 232. Keynes and Lapidge point to the fact that the letter may be an "eleventh-century forgery, contrived by Pope Gregory VII in his attempt to establish a feudal relationship with William the Conqueror" (232). See: Janet L. Nelson, "The Problem of King Alfred's Royal Anointing," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 18 (1967): 145–63.

cum magno honore Romam perrexit, praefatumque filium suum Aelfredum iterum in eandem viam secum ducens, eo quod illum plus ceteris filiis diligebat, ibique anno integro remoratus est.[6]—"He [i.e. Æthelwulf] travelled to Rome in that year in great state, taking his son Alfred with him, for a second time on the same journey, because he loved him more than his other sons; there he remained for a whole year."[7] Imaginably, it was due to this royal sojourn that the successor of Pope Leo, Benedict III, decided to restore the Schola Saxorum, also known as Schola Anglorum, a foundation for English-speaking pilgrims to Rome within the Borgo and not far from St. Peter's, that was burned down by Saracens a decade before Alfred's alleged second visit.[8] Traces of the presence of Anglo-Saxon pilgrims to the city of St. Peter can still be found today: the Schola Saxorum was located in the place where stands the present-day Church of the Santo Spirito in Sassia, the "Holy Spirit in the Saxon district," whereas the very name of the Borgo has associations with Germanic languages, as it is cognate with the Old English *burh*. Mariano Borgatti, one of Rome's prominent historians of the early twentieth century, claimed that the name of the district was an Italianised version of the word for a city used by pilgrims from Germanic-speaking parts of Europe.[9]

Inasmuch as young Alfred's journeys and sojourns in Rome are intriguing, aside from the mentions in the *Vita Aelfredi*, as well as the papal and Frankish documents, we have no personal account of Alfred's stay in the city whatsoever, let alone any of his own impressions of it and of the impact the city made on him. We may, of course, rather safely assume that it must have been considerable. It is difficult for Rome not to make a lasting impression on anyone, least of all on a five-year-old prince from a distant kingdom, beleaguered, like the rest of Christian Europe then, by barbarians from the North. One cannot help but imagine little Alfred, so very much loved, as Asser claims, by his royal parents for

6 Asser, *Vita Aelfredi*, 11.

7 Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 70.

8 Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Europe, 300–1000* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 337–38.

9 Mariano Bogatti, *Borgo e S. Pietro nel* 1300*, nel 1600 e nel 1925* (Roma: Federico Pustet, 1926), 13.

displaying a rare aptness for learning,[10] pleading with his father to take him to Rome once more, on hearing that the king is planning a visit there. And regardless of what the pope wanted to achieve politically by this gesture, the image of a five-year-old upon whom the Roman Pontiff bestows all the trappings of a consul in a solemn ceremony is especially evocative, even if Asser's account of it was an instance of a late ninth-century political spin. The myth-making power of that moment later became one of the seminal apocryphal stories associated with the king that contributed to his cult and to the vision of England as partaking in the cultural and political inheritance of Rome. The investiture of Alfred as a Roman consul, however true or fictionalised, did not fail to produce iconic representations of an angelic boy respectfully kneeling or resolutely standing before Pope Leo, from Richard Westell's *Prince Alfred before Pope Leo III*, painted for Robert Bowyer's "Historic Gallery" (1794),[11] to J. W. Kennedy's illustration to Eva March Tappan's novel, *In the Days of Alfred the Great* (1900).[12]

However we judge the possibility of Alfred's investiture, since we know of no other continental journeys undertaken later by him, the recollections of his Roman experiences may be assumed to have been amongst the most important and most valued of his childhood memories. Conceivably, they may have accompanied him during the years of the Viking campaigns, in what might have seemed to him as a final struggle to preserve the Saxon *Christianitas* and to preserve whatever was left of the Roman civilization in Britain. Perhaps they were also among the manifold reasons which facilitated Alfred's unique programme of learning, introduced by him in the versed preface to allegedly his translation of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*. In it Alfred the translator is positioned as someone resembling the literal sense of the word *pontifex*, a bridge-builder between the wisdom of Gregory, the Pontifex Maximus, and those of the king's countrymen who knew little

10 Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 74–75.

11 Simon Keynes, "The Cult of King Alfred the Great," *Anglo-Saxon England* 28 (1999), plate XI*a*.

12 Eva March Tappan, *In the Days of Alfred the Great* (Boston: Lee and Shephard, 1900), 77.

Latin. In the preface Gregory is not only *dryhtnes cempa* / *Rome papa* (4–5), "the Lord's / champion, the pope in Rome" but he is also

> … Rom-wara betest,
> monna mod-welegost, mærðum gefrægost. [9–10]
> [the best of Romans, most wealthy in mind among
> men, most renowned for his glorious deeds …][13]

The preface, however, admires not only Gregory himself, but, indirectly, also the Romans of whom he was the best and, even more indirectly, the former greatness of the city, which Alfred might have recognised as an echo of his own childish memories and sense of wonder. Thus, if Alfred's byname of the Great, attributed to him already by Matthew Paris some time around mid-thirteenth century,[14] became permanently sealed with his name because he was a visionary king, then the origins of his cultural and political vision at least to some extent lie in how Alfred saw, understood, and recreated Rome for himself.

Alfred's imagined boyish urban amazement can be then tentatively envisaged as being partly behind the driving forces which defined his rule. Of course, the *Romanitas* was never far away from the Saxon royal family or indeed anyone inhabiting post-Roman Britain. After all, even if, as Alfred phrases it in his prose preface to *The Pastoral Care*, the knowledge of Latin declined south of the river Humber,[15] people travelled on Roman roads, crossed rivers using Roman bridges, were familiar with and partially used whatever remained of Roman structures, while Northumbrian, Mercian, and Saxon kings, along with other Christian rulers of the times, presented themselves on their coins much like Roman emperors: in beardless and diademed profiles. Nonetheless, the impact that Rome made as one entered the city from the north, perhaps along the old northern triumphal road, the Via Cassia, merging into the Via

13 Susan Irvine and Malcolm R. Godden, eds. and trans., *The Old English Boethius with Verse Prologues and Epilogues Associated with King Alfred* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 408–409.

14 Keynes, "The Cult of King Alfred," 231–32.

15 Henry Sweet, ed., *King Alfred's West Saxon Version of Gregory's* Pastoral Care (London: Early English Text Society, 1871), 3.

Flamina, under the still standing arches of Marcus Aurelius, Claudius and Diocletian, must have been quite unparalleled. Since the beginning of the ninth century, the city, competing in this with Constantinople, was trying to redefine itself as a revived imperial centre, after Charlemagne, his grandson Lothair and great-grandson Louis II were crowned emperors there.[16] Many of the grandiose structures stood relatively intact, their façades still dressed in marble panes that centuries later were to adorn Rome's renaissance palazzo and churches. And a new imposing structure had just been finished by the time of Alfred's first visit: about a year before it, the Leonine Wall encircled the Vatican on the orders of Pope Leo in the aftermath of a Saracenic sack of St. Peter's Basilica.[17] The visitors from distant Wessex could have seen in that Arabic attack an echo of the pagan assaults Christianity was experiencing in the north.

But the Rome that little Alfred saw must have also been a city of squalor where a variety of dangers may have lurked; from the obvious muggings to the more refined dangers to one's soul. The latter would have included not only the districts of shady reputation, but also that which, with a large dose of probability, would have been both appealing and frightening to a foreign boy: places marked by early Christian martyrdom as well as slowly decaying former temples and public structures, which childish or medieval imagination may have populated with stories, but also spirits and demons. Conjectural as all the above must perforce be, it is not an unlikely portrayal of Alfred's Rome and if it provided Alfred with any inspiration which he exercised in his future, this inspiration resulted as much from what Rome was in Alfred's time and from what the then Rome no longer was—in both cases these were the known and imagined vestiges of its past.

Alfred's Rome is then a city that is doubly negated or is a city that is doubly not—firstly, it is the Rome which does not exist for us, since we may only hypothesise about how the young *aethling*, that is, the Wessexian prince, felt about it. Secondly, it is the city that lived, as indeed it does today, under the shadow of its past, a city that, we must imagine, was full of lacunae, which Alfred may have been filling in on his progress

16 Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, 302, 338–39.

17 Ibid., 338.

through it with how he conjectured whatever he understood and saw left of Rome's history. The city of some thirty thousand people in the ninth century was a far cry from an urban metropolis that it once had been.[18] That, however, left plenty of long abandoned structures and plenty of opportunities for thinking about the meaning behind them. Not only about what purposes they may have served and who may have populated them, but, more importantly, what purpose their state contemporary to Alfred served in the divine course of events. We cannot ever be certain whether of all texts by St. Augustine Alfred was familiar with *De excidio urbis Romae sermo*, "Sermon on the Destruction of the City of Rome," where Augustine presented a historiosophical and theological understanding of the destruction and decline of Rome. We may be sure, however, that it furnished one of the most potent early medieval themes—a lesson to be drawn from an interrelation between the state of things that was and the state of things that is.

The theme prominently marks King Alfred's, or at least Alfred-inspired, translation of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*, which is more of a free adaptation than its accurate rendition.[19] It opens with a verse preface allegedly coming from Alfred himself and then follows a metric text (Meter I) that is not present in the original, but one that recounts the invasion of Italy and the sack of Rome by the Visigoths under Alaric in 410 A.D. Thus, one of the fundamental Old English philosophical texts begins with a powerful reference to the demise of the city:

> Ða wæs Romana rice gewunnen
> abrocen burga cyst; beadurincum wæs
> Rom gerymed. Rædgot and Aleric
> foron on ðæt fæsten; fleah casere
> mid þam æþelingum ut on Crecas.
> Ne meahte þa seo wea-laf wige forstandan

18 Sing C. Chew, *The Recurring Dark Ages* (Plymouth: Altamira Press, 2007), 152–53.

19 Susan Irvine and Malcolm R. Godden, eds. and trans., *The Old English Boethius*, ix–xii.

Gotan mid guðe; gio-monna gestrion
sealdon unwillum eþel-weardas,
halige aðas: wæs gehwæðeres waa. [17–25]

[Then the kingdom of the Romans was conquered,
the finest of cities sacked; Rome was opened up
to the warriors. Raedgota and Alaric
went into the stronghold; the emperor fled
with the princes away to the Greeks [Byzantines]
Then the survivors could not withstand the Goths
in war, in battle; the guardians of the homeland
reluctantly gave up their ancestors' treasure and made
sacred promises: it was an affliction in both respects.][20]

The curiously phrased *gehwæðeres waa*, "affliction in both respects" (25) most likely concerns not merely the material damage and suffering but, more importantly, the spiritual torment brought by the annihilation of the previous state of the city. Yet, if this case of *excidio urbis* lamentation is to be understood as an epigraph to the entire adaptation of Boethius, then Rome that, because of the Visigothic sack, becomes a city that it was not, simultaneously becomes an inspiration for the philosophical enquiry into the significance of acceptance of the volatility of things against wisdom stemming from experience.

A similar sense associated with the *excidio urbis* motif reverberates throughout the depiction of the second ruined city to be explored in this paper, that is, throughout probably the best known of all Old English poems with the urban theme. The poem, however, speaks not of a city, but of its ruins and although *The Ruin*, for that is its current editorial title, is itself a textual wreck, given all the damage sustained by the last leaves of the Exeter codex it survives on, it is symptomatic that it says more about Anglo-Saxon attitudes to urban space by addressing their remains, than if it were to describe a living urban organism. With all the references to the waterworks and baths, *The Ruin* has often been thought to refer to the remains of Aqua Sulis, that is, present-day city

20 Ibid., 6–7.

of Bath in Somerset,[21] an important Romano-Celtic cult centre, which, around the year 886, experienced considerable revival and was included in King Alfred's plan of establishing fortified boroughs as a system of anti-Viking defences.[22] Whether the poem indeed speaks of Bath is ultimately inconclusive, as the *thermae*, public baths, were ubiquitously present around the remains of Roman civic and military structures. It is then not the exact identity of the city that is central—although it may have been inscribed in the lines now lost—but the poem's exploitation of the imagery of the present ruin and imagined past splendour, a cross between the already mentioned theme of *excidio urbis* and, known chiefly from Latin sources, theme of the *encomium urbis*, a eulogy to a city.

The Ruin's narrator is a pensive flaneur among the vestiges of buildings in the manner which may bring the hypothetical images of prince Alfred's experience of Rome. And, as was the case above, the narrator of *The Ruin* leaves us guessing and speculating as to what the poem's conclusion was. Most typically, the poem is assumed to have served as an *exemplum* in the temporariness of human achievement[23]—the opening image of the fate breaking the city walls and buildings, the works of giants crumbling, sets a familiar theme of evanescence and of *sic transit gloria*. But whatever the poem's conclusion, ultimately, like the earlier speculations about Alfred's Roman experience, it leaves its narrator and then also us in an endless maze of inconclusiveness, or, to refer to the present volume's title, in a state of urban a-*maze*-ment. It is only by seeing and saying what the city is not that its spiritual and histioriosophic sense appears, but then the very act of saying what the city is not is already logically flawed, for not knowing what it was makes it impossible to truly know what it was not. Thus, the medievally understood *sensus moralis*, that is, the moral sense of *The Ruin* as a poem and the moral sense of the ruins perceived by the narrator (as well as by our hypothetical Alfred) is, in a way, apophatic, since it can be delineated by

21 Michael Lapidge et al. eds., *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 400.

22 Jean Manco, "Alfred's Borough," in *Bath Past*, 2006, accessed January 5, 2015, http://www.buildinghistory.org/bath/saxon/alfredsborough.shtml.

23 Hugh T. Keenan, "*The Ruin* as Babylon," *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 11 (1966): 109–117.

negative statements: if we recall the seemingly conflicting remarks made by the Neo-Platonic proponent of apophasis, Pseudo-Dionysius, we see a similar antagonism. Speaking of God in his *Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius says: "He is known to all from all things and he is known to no one from anything."[24] The sense of the city of *The Ruin* is likewise known from what it was at the poem's given moment of creation and it is also known from what it then was not, the latter ultimately being impossible to be determined by anyone.

Therefore, one may venture a statement that for literary and didactic purposes of Old English poetry a city which no longer is its former splendid self is much more important and much more effective. In fact, a survey of other Old English images of the city shows a predominant pattern of associations with negative portrayals of cities as either places associated with destruction brought by the basic instability of earthly substance or as places threatening with the destruction of one's moral integrity.[25] To mention one of the most characteristic instances of such didactic perspective, the temporariness of the joy and splendour the cities provide is what *The Seafarer* calls *deade lif / laene on londe,* "a dead life loaned on land" (65–66). For its narrator

> … se þe ah lifes wyn
> gebiden in burgum, bealosiþa hwon,
> wlonc ond wingal, …[26] [27b–28a]
>
> [… he who lives a joyful life in cities, with little misfortune,
> proud and flushed with wine…]

is already spiritually dead, and it is then stepping outside the city or, with reference to *The Ruin* and Alfred's Metre I, stepping into what the city no longer is that may provide one with true sense.

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24 Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names* in *Pseudo-Dionysius. The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (London: SPCK, 1987), 109.

25 Cf. Paolo Zanna, "*Descriptiones urbium* and Elegy in Latin and Vernaculars in the Early Middle Ages," *Studii medievali* 32 (1991): 523–96.

26 Bernard J. Muir, ed., *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, vol. I (Exeter: Exeter University Press: 1994), 233.

To conclude, as much as we may be speculating about the impact that the images of Rome's ruins and thus images of what Rome no longer was may have had on the shaping of the political and cultural vision of the young Alfred, we may make a similar comment about the effect of *The Ruin*. This is understandable in the light of the Christian doctrine, since a perfect city may only be so when it is in union with God, that is, when it is the city that St. Augustine portrayed in *De civitate Dei*. Only then does it become the heavenly Jerusalem. The negative or apophatic vision of the city in Old English literary tradition corresponds, it seems, to the convoluted meanings of the neo-Platonic negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, namely to the way of understanding reality through the awareness of its lacunae. Much like trying to make sense of a city through its ruins, it is a way of seeing the empty spaces, as invitations to read their significant absences. An Anglo-Saxon walk through a ruined city, it seems, paradoxically offers an augmentation of reality and is an existential practice in the *promising* elusiveness of signification far beyond any physical city boundaries.

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Rafał Borysławski

Miasto, którego nie ma: apofatyka i staroangielski urbanizm

STRESZCZENIE

W artykule przedstawiono dwa staroangielskie wyobrażenia spacerów przez nieistniejące miasta, a także implikacje rozumienia tych wyobrażeń dla filozofii wczesnego średniowiecza. Pierwsza część jest propozycją wyobrażenia Rzymu w latach 853 i 855, kiedy to gościł w nim młody książę Wesseksu, Alfred, późniejszy król Alfred Wielki. Druga część artykułu opiera się na rozumieniu poematu *The Ruin*, jednej z elegii z Księgi z Exeter, przedstawiającej przemyślenia o pozostałościach innego rzymskiego miasta, najprawdopodobniej Aqua Sulis, czyli późniejszego Bath. Hipotetyczne refleksje młodego Alfreda być może zbiegają się z tymi, które pojawiają się w metrycznych wprowadzeniach do rozdziałów *O pocieszeniu, jakie daje filozofia* Beocjusza, którego tłumaczenie zainspirował

sam król, natomiast obraz miasta w *The Ruin* jest jeszcze jednym przykładem tekstu typu *excidio urbis*. Razem obie te wizje potwierdzają metafizyczną wartość miasta będącego swoim negatywem, czyli miastem stworzonym z braków, pustek i pozostałości swojej przeszłości. Taki sposób rozumienia „miast, których nie ma" jest tutaj przedstawiany jako przykład myślenia apofatycznego, podobnego w swej naturze do myślenia Pseudo-Dionizego, gdzie więcej może zostać wyrażone poprzez pytania i negacje niż przez świadectwa oparte na znanych faktach. Zaproponowane w artykule przechadzki przez zrujnowane miasta mogą zatem paradoksalnie przedstawiać rzeczywistość poszerzoną i stanowić przykłady egzystencjalnej praktyki ulotności poznania, która wymyka się wszelkim zurbanizowanym granicom.

Rafał Borysławski

Eine Stadt, die es nicht gibt: Apophatik und altenglischer Urbanismus

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In dem Artikel werden zwei altenglische Vorstellungen von den Spaziergängen durch nicht existierende Städte und deren Folgen für frühmittelalterliche Philosophie besprochen. Der erste Teil ist eine Vorstellung von Rom in den Jahren 853 und 855, als dort der junge Prinz von Wessex, Alfred, der spätere König Alfred der Große verweilte. Der zweite Teil des Artikels stützt sich auf die Auslegung des Poems *The Ruin,* einer der Elegien von dem Buch von Exeter, das die Überlegungen zu den Überresten einer anderen römischen Stadt, wahrscheinlich Aqua Sulis, d.i. des späteren Bath enthält. Es kann sein, dass hypothetische Reflexionen des jungen Alfreds mit den Boëtius Reflexionen in metrischen Einführungen in die Kapitel *Zum Trost, den die Philosophie bietet*, deren Übersetzung von dem König selbst inspiriert wurde, zusammenfallen, doch das Bild der Stadt in *The Ruin* ist noch ein weiteres Beispiel für den Text *excidio urbis.* Die beiden Vorstellungen bestätigen einen metaphysischen Wert der Stadt als eine Art Negativ, d.h. eine aus Mängeln, Leeren und Überresten ihrer Vergangenheit gebildete Stadt. So wahrgenommene „Städte, die es nicht gibt" erscheinen hier als ein Beispiel für die von ihrer Natur aus der Philosophie von Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita ähnlichen apophatischen Betrachtungsweise, die viel mehr mit Fragen und Negationen als mit den auf bekannten Fakten basierenden Zeugnissen ausdrückt. Die in dem Artikel empfohlenen Spaziergänge durch ruinierte Städte können also paradox eine erweiterte Wirklichkeit darstellen und ein Beispiel für existentielle Praktiken der Erkenntnisflüchtigkeit werden, die allen urbanisierten Grenze entgleitet.